

**GRAMMAR OF THE MODERN
SYRIAC LANGUAGE: AS
SPOKEN IN OROOMIAH,
PERSIA, AND IN KOORDISTAN**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649596379

Grammar of the Modern Syriac Language: As Spoken in Oroomiah, Persia, and in Koordistan
by D. T. Stoddard

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Cover @ 2017

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D. T. STODDARD

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AND IN
KOORDISTAN.

BY
REV. D. T. STODDARD,
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[FROM THE JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ORIENTAL SOCIETY, VOL. V, 1855.]

NEW HAVEN:
FOR THE AMERICAN ORIENTAL SOCIETY,

PRINTED BY E. L. HALEN, PRINTER TO YALE COLLEGE.

M D C C C L V.

SOLD BY THE SOCIETY'S AGENTS:

NEW YORK: B. WESTERMANN & CO., 440 BROADWAY;
LONDON: TRÜBNER & CO.; PARIS: BENJ. DUPRAT;
LEIPZIG: F. A. BROCKHAUS.

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

It is an interesting fact that, although the Nestorians of Persia have for many centuries been conquered and outnumbered, and have had very little share in civil affairs, and their brethren in the Koordish Mountains have enjoyed only a doubtful independence, they have preserved to the present time a knowledge of their vernacular language. In Persia, most of the Nestorians are indeed able to speak fluently the rude Tatar (Turkish) dialect used by the Mohammedans of this province, and those of the mountains are equally familiar with the language of the Koords. Still, they have a strong preference for their own tongue, and make it the constant and only medium of intercourse with each other. This is the more noticeable, as in modern times, until within a short period, they had no current literature, and the spoken dialect was not even reduced to writing. Their manuscript copies of the Bible and other books were very scarce, and were carefully hid out of sight, covered with dust and mildew. Very few, if any, except the clergy, aspired to be readers, and still fewer were able to read with any degree of intelligence.

The first attempt worthy of record to reduce the Modern Syriac to writing, was made by Rev. Justin Perkins, a Missionary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, at Tabreez, in the winter of 1834-5, in connection with the study of the language, under the instruction of the Nestorian Bishop Mar Yohannan.

The first attempt to write it in a permanent and useful form, was made by Dr. Perkins in the construction of school-cards, in the winter of 1836, after he and Dr. Grant had settled at Oroomiah. On the 18th of January of that year their first school was commenced. Says Dr. Perkins: "Seven boys

from the city attended. They all took their stand in a semi-circle around the manuscript card suspended on the wall, which Priest Abraham with my assistance had prepared; and as they learned their letters and then began to repeat a sentence of the Lord's prayer, for the first time, with a delight and satisfaction, beaming from their faces, equalled only by the novelty of their employment, I could understand something of the inspiration of Dr. Chalmers, when he pronounced the Indian boy in the woods, first learning to read, to be the sublimest object in the world."—*Residence in Persia*, p. 250.

In another connection, Dr. Perkins, speaking of the preparation of the cards for that missionary school, says: "There was no literary matter for its instruction and alimment, save in the dead, obsolete language. I therefore immediately commenced translating portions of the Scriptures from the Ancient Syriac copies, by the assistance of some of the best educated of the native clergy. We first translated the Lord's prayer. I well remember my own emotions on that occasion. It seemed like the first handful of corn to be cast upon the top of the naked mountains; and the Nestorian priests who were with me, were themselves interested above measure to see their spoken language in a written form. They would read a line and then break out in immoderate laughter, so amused were they, and so strange did it appear to them, to hear the familiar sounds of their own language read, as well as spoken. We copied this translation of the Lord's prayer on cards for our classes. Our copies were few. We therefore hung up the card upon the wall of the school-room, and a company of children would assemble around it, at as great a distance from the card as they could see, and thus they learned to read. We next translated the ten commandments, and wrote them on cards in the same way, and then other detached portions of the Word of God; and thus continued to prepare reading matter by the use of the pen, for our increasing number of schools, until the arrival of our press in 1840. This event was hailed with the utmost joy by the Nestorians, who had long been waiting for the press, with an anxiety bordering on impatience; and it was no less an object of interest and wonder to the Mohammedans. They too soon urgently pressed their suit, that we should print books for them also; and a very respectable young Meerza sought, with unyield-

ing importunity, a place among the Nestorian apprentices, that he too might learn to print. The first book which we printed in the modern language, was a small tract, made up of passages from the Holy Scriptures. As I carried the proof-sheets of it from the printing-office into my study for correction, and laid them upon my table before our translators, Priests Abraham and Dunkba, they were struck with mute rapture and astonishment, to see their language in print: though they themselves had assisted me, a few days before, in preparing the same matter for the press. As soon as recovery from their first surprise allowed them utterance, 'It is time to give glory to God,' they each exclaimed, 'that we behold the commencement of printing books for our people:' a sentiment to which I could give my hearty response."

The first printing in the Nestorian character was an edition of the four Gospels published by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1829, the type being prepared in London from a manuscript copy of the Gospels obtained from Mar Yohannan, by the eccentric traveller Dr. Wolff, several years before, and taken by him to England for that purpose. This volume is all that has ever been printed in the modern language of the Nestorians, otherwise than by the agency of our mission-press, with the exception of one or two small Papal tracts, published a few years since at Constantinople, with miserable type prepared under the supervision of the Jesuits in that city.

Since the arrival of our press in 1840, it has been busily employed in printing books for the Nestorians, in both their ancient and modern language, mostly in the latter.

Dr. Perkins has furnished the following list of our more important publications, arranged nearly in the order in which they have been issued from the press.

THE PSALMS, as used in the Nestorian churches, with the Rubrics, in Ancient Syriac. 196 pp. 4to.

INSTRUCTIONS FROM THE WORD OF GOD, in Modern Syriac. (Extracts from the Bible.) 77 pp. 12mo.

THE ACTS AND THE EPISTLES, in Ancient Syriac. 8vo.

THE GREAT SALVATION, a tract in Modern Syriac.

SIXTEEN SHORT SERMONS, in Modern Syriac.

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